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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0167
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2017

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SHIA POLITICIAN ON ELECTION, MARCH 14
MISTAKES, SHIA ALTERNATIVES TO HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Mohamed Beydoun, a Shia and former Amal MP, was pessimistic about the likelihood of the presidential election actually taking place by the midnight November 23 deadline. Beydoun said Syria is betting on an impasse following the failure of majority leader Saad Hariri and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri to reach agreement on a consensus candidate. The ensuing constitutional vacuum would finally bring all parties (France and the U.S. included) around to the realization that only Syria can deal with Lebanon, according to this view.

2. (C) Beydoun attributed waning public support for March 14 to a number of errors committed by its leadership (especially Saad Hariri), beginning with the reelection of Nabih Berri as speaker of parliament in 2005. Beydoun also had nothing good to say about the Saudi role in the Lebanese elections specifically, and the national political scene in general. Beydoun further deplored the ways Hizballah and Amal continue to exploit GOL financing, especially for war reconstruction projects, while the GOL and the majority are perceived as increasingly incompetent and corrupt. He added that Hizballah has the ear of ordinary Shia, particularly with regard to spreading rumors about U.S. scheming in Lebanese affairs. As for third-way Shia, or those who are trying to break Hizballah and Amal's grip on Shia political loyalties, Beydoun said real change in this area will have to wait for a new generation of Shia political and civil society activists. End summary.

BLEAK OUTLOOK FOR ELECTION

3. (C) In a November 16 meeting, former Amal MP Mohamed Beydoun, a Shia, told Poloff and FSN Political Advisor that it was ironic that anti-Syrian March 14 allowed Nabih Berri's reelection as speaker of parliament in 2005, because Syria's goal of preventing Lebanese institutions from functioning independently was Berri's as well. Beydoun added that Berri communicates with Syria through Amal MP Ali Hassan Khalil, who makes weekly visits to Damascus. On the other hand, Beydoun is certain that, come November 24, President Emile Lahoud will leave Baabda Palace quietly. Nevertheless, Beydoun thinks March 14 should leak to the press now that it will issue an arrest warrant for him, should he attempt to take any unconstitutional actions, such as installing a second government.

14. (C) As for the list of candidates drawn up by Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, Beydoun insisted that March 14 needs a strong candidate, such as Nassib Lahoud, and dismissed other compromise possibilities, such as Joseph Torbey, as very weak. Beydoun thinks even Nassib Lahoud could become acceptable to Hizballah, if he would accompany his election with the right "political package." According to Beydoun, election of a weak consensus candidate will cause March 14 to lose even more popular support. Clearly, Beydoun considers the whole consensus candidate idea ill-advised for March 14 interests, since Berri is the executor of a Syrian agenda.

15. (C) If March 14 does not become more decisive and issue an ultimatum, the country is heading toward a political void that only the Syrians can fill. The absence of an election by the November 23 deadline will create a vacuum. After two or three months, even the U.S. and other international players will come around to seeing Syria as the answer to the political crisis, Beydoun said.

16. (C) Beydoun thinks March 14 timidity is in part due to Hariri's failure to get strong U.S. support for a "half 1" election. Nevertheless, Beydoun still favors a simple majority election for a March 14 candidate and predicted the fallout would be limited to minor disturbances, or perhaps a general strike. According to Beydoun, Hizballah is not inclined to take up arms itself, but might encourage some of its allies, such as Aoun's supporters, to create some minor civil disorder.

HARIRI AND SAUDIS OUTFOXED BY OPPOSITION

17. (C) Beydoun dismissed Saudi diplomatic efforts as naive,
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citing their refusal to deal with the Syrians, while supporting the Berri initiative. The Berri initiative was, in essence, a means of achieving Syrian goals, albeit in a somewhat circuitous manner. Beydoun also said he had on several occasions fruitlessly urged Saudi Ambassador Khoja to encourage his government to promote Shia political diversity by supporting Shia not associated with Hizballah and Amal.

18. (C) Beydoun faulted majority leader Hariri for focusing on becoming prime minister in the next government (if there should be one), while he should be concentrating on building up support for March 14 in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Beydoun believes March 14 stands to lose if it does not salvage its political standing and increase its popular base.

Beydoun is also certain Hariri would fail as head of government and, should Hariri become prime minister, predicted a popular uprising triggered by rising prices, frozen wages, and unemployment, all problems Hariri is unqualified to deal with.

NO READY ALTERNATIVE TO HIZBALLAH

EXPLOITATION OF SHIA FEAR

19. (C) According to Beydoun, Hizballah continues to exploit Lebanese Shia fear of expulsion from Lebanon (by Israel), and uses circumstances created by the July 2006 war to increase its popular support. For example, although a total of 30 thousand homes were destroyed in the war, Hizballah and Amal have paid out compensation to 115 thousand homeowners, thus astronomically increasing their popularity. A recent rumor started by Hizballah in the southern suburbs has the U.S. recruiting remnants of Antoine Lahd's Israeli surrogate army, training them in Cyprus, and then bringing them to Beirut to rout Hizballah.

110. (C) Beydoun lamented that Shia unaligned with either Hizballah or Amal suffer from a lack of financial resources,

but also dismissed current alternative political movements, such as Lebanese Option, as "Hariri dominated" and not credible. He pointed out that there are numerous Shia doctors, lawyers and businessmen in the south who were ready to enter politics, if they could only get financial backing.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Beydoun, who was expelled from Amal for being too secular, as well as too close to the Hariris (he was Minister of Energy and Water in assassinated PM Rafiq Hariri's government), continues to be refreshingly non-conformist. He is still regarded in political circles as intellectually sharp, and as someone who could be instrumental in lessening inter-confessional tension, but that alone is not likely to improve his political fortunes. End comment.

FELTMAN